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ABSTRACT

This paper raises awareness of the accomplishments of Catholic schools and discusses the model of quality education Catholic schools represent. First, a picture of American public education as a whole is presented, followed by a description of three areas in which the Catholic schools serve as a model for the reforms happening in American public school systems. The first area is curriculum, which is humanities-based and aimed at ethical as well as cultural literacy. The second area deals with teacher education and the fact that Catholic teachers are not required to train in colleges of education. The third area is the administrative structure, which recognizes that the larger the administrative bureauracy, the lower the quality of education. Other issues discussed are innercity Catholic schools and school choice. (SI)

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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: A GIFT TO THE NATION

by

Lynne V. Cheney

Chairman

National Endowment for the Humanities

Address to the

National Catholic Educational Association Convention,

Exposition, and Religious Education Congress

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Chicago, Illinois

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It's a pleasure to be here, to speak before a group of educators. It's a pleasure, in part, because I know that I do not have to explain to such a group what the humanities are. I do have to explain that term rather often. It is a mystery to many people--as I know from looking at my mail. Several months ago, I received a letter addressed the the NATURAL Endowment for the Humanities, a title that has a nice woodsy air about it. Recently I got a card addressed to the National Endowment for the AMENITIES--and that may well become my all-time favorite, because there's something appropriate about the mistake. History, literature and the other subjects of the humanities do give us pleasure.

But they also give something far more important: a connection to the past that is anchor for us in the present. When we reach into the past, we cannot encompass the totality of other lives and times. We strip away the thousand details of existence and come face-to-face with the age-old questions: How do we know our duty? How do we deal with our fate? How do we give our lives meaning and dignity? Pondering such questions, we realize that others have pondered them. We realize that we are not the first to know joy and sadness, not the first to set out on the human journey.

The past also offers lessons, and although we shall surely dispute what they are, even as we do so, we enlarge our perspective on the present. What does it mean that the Roman republic failed? That Athens fell? What does it mean for us? What conditions and commitments in the past have allowed democracy to flourish? How can we nurture democratic institutions today?

There are many reasons why the study of subjects like history and literature should be encouraged--and much evidence that it is not being encouraged as much as it should be. A 1986 survey funded by the Endowment showed, for example, that more than 30 percent of the nation's seventeen-year-olds think that Columbus sailed sometime after 1750. More than 40 percent of those seventeen-year-olds could not locate World War I within the correct half-century. More than two-thirds could not place the Civil War. Magna Carta was a mystery to most of the students tested, and so were the great names of literature: Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Whitman, Faulkner, Austen, Hawthorne.

The failures we noted in the humanities have been noted by others in mathematics and science. Surveys showing American students trailing far behind the students of other nations in command of these subjects have become almost routine. We used

to think only death and taxes were inevitable. Now reports about poor academic performance are beginning to seem that way.

In a report issued by the Endowment in 1987, we cited some of the reasons American students do not do as well as they should in the humanities. The curriculum is one problem. In most states, we noted, only a single year of history was required for high school graduation. Students in academic tracks typically take more, but seldom enough to learn the history of the United States and Western civilization, much less to do something we in this society are increasingly understanding is important, and that is to learn about the world's other great cultural traditions. Moreover, an increasing number of students in our schools are moving from the academic track to "general education" and "vocational education" programs. More than 60 percent of the students enrolled in our schools now are in these non-academic tracks where requirements for subjects like history are almost always fewer.

There are problems, as well, with the way we have prepared and sustained teachers. All too often we have required prospective teachers to spend time taking education courses that are not useful: "cheap hoops," one teacher I talked to called them, through which one must jump in order to enter the classroom. At some universities, future teachers

have been allowed to take up to half the hours necessary for a bachelor's degree in education, leaving them knowing less than they should about the subjects they teach.

Once we get teachers into the classroom, we give them too few opportunities to learn more about their subjects. We encourage them to take more courses in education, instead; and in case there are some who might wish to take up study of their subjects on their own, we burden them with a sufficient number of non-teaching duties so as to be sure to stifle such a dangerous impulse. We put more money into education, but it too seldom benefits the the teacher or the classroom. Between 1960 and 1984, while the number of teachers grew by 57 percent, administrative personnel grew by 500 percent.

Now this is in our public schools, of course, and I know you are wondering when I'm going to get to Catholic schools. But I have deliberately set out a picture of public education in order to make an important point. Many of the most hopeful changes beginning to occur in American public education, many of the reforms most likely to improve our public schools, are bringing those schools closer to the private model that you represent.

There are at least three areas in which this is true, and the first is in the curriculum. Where education reform is most vital, you are likely to find efforts underway to increase

requirements in history, literature and foreign languages--and in math and science as well. In California, to cite a spectacular example for the humanities, a new program will require that history be studied almost every year from the fourth grade on, in an ordered, sequential progression. And values will be emphasized in the new history curriculum: it aims at ethical as well as cultural literacy.

Such efforts will make public schools more like private schools, where requirements have typically been higher. Statistics show that Catholic school students, for example, complete more semesters of course work in history, literature, foreign languages, mathematics and science than do students in public schools--more, in fact, than do students in other private schools. Your students--more than 72 percent of them--are overwhelmingly in the academic track; and those who are in general and vocational programs find that much is expected of them. In foreign languages, for example, they complete twice as many semesters of coursework as do general and vocational students in public schools. And the most commonly studied language in your schools, let me note, is Spanish.

You have also long recognized the importance of moral education. Joanne Blaney, principal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help High School in Washington, D. C., recently told a

reporter, "As a Catholic school, we believe we are here to teach the child to grow spiritually and academically." It is hard to find a more concise statement of ethical and cultural literacy. "Children . . . need a firm moral base for making decisions later in life," Blaney observed; and increasing numbers of public educators are realizing that the schools have a role to play in building that base.

A second way in which school reform efforts are bringing public schools closer to the private model has to do with teacher education. States and localities that want to improve schools are trying to make sure that prospective teachers are able to devote sufficient time in college to studying the subjects they will teach. In Texas, for example, the legislature has mandated an upper limit on the number of hours that can be required in departments of education. There is trench warfare going on in Texas about this new law, but it is in place; and the determined legislators who passed it remain steadfast. In dozens of localities and states, alternative certification programs have been been put in place that allow men and women with bachelor's degrees in subject areas to teach in our schools without going through regular programs of teacher training.

And, again, this follows your model. You have not required your teachers to train in colleges of education. In

fact, I suspect that many of your best lay teachers choose to teach in your schools precisely because you have not had such a requirement.

One last example of the way in which you have served as a model. It is becoming almost universally recognized that administrative structures that grow too large strangle our schools. It is almost universally recognized, in fact, that the larger the administrative bureaucracy, the worse schools are likely to be.

A year or so ago, I visited the administrative headquarters of the Chicago school system and was amazed. Row after row of desks in room after room on floor after floor in building after building. My tour guide told me that Japanese officials who had visited the administrative headquarters had been stunned into disbelief. No, they said. This couldn't be the headquarters for a single city. This must at least be the Department of Education for the entire United States. I was reminded of pictures I've seen of the bureaucracy that burgeoned in Washington during World War II--row after row of desks in open spaces, hundreds upon hundreds of people.

But, to their credit, those wartime bureaucrats in Washington helped win a war. The Chicago public schools--with

a dropout rate of 45 percent, with the average score on college entrance exams in half the city's high schools in the bottom one percent of the nation--are in danger of being lost. Now let me be very clear that there are exceptions: public schools in Chicago, like Ray Elementary, where there is order, discipline, a devotion to excellence; outstanding public school teachers, like Dr. Alice Price at Lincoln Park High School, who was recently recognized as Illinois' teacher/scholar for 1989. In painting problems with a broad brush, we must be careful not to cover over what is good. Where there are examples of things going right, we need to recognize them so we can build on them.

But the bureaucracy, some 3000 people for a school system of some 400,000 students needs no building on. Quite the contrary. And perhaps the single most important thing that has happened for Chicago's schools recently has been the state legislature's action to break the bureaucracy's hold, to reduce its size and turn control of the schools over to local committees.

Chicago's Catholic schools with about half as many students as the public schools have been operating with a bureaucracy one/one hundredth the size. In New York City, a similar comparison holds. There, with about a million students in the public schools, there are six thousand people in the central office bureaucracy, about one administrator, in other words, for every 165 students. In New York City's Catholic

school system, which enrolls about 200,000 students, there are 67 administrators--or about one for every 3,000 students. One for every 165 students in public schools; one for every 3000 students in Catholic schools. That is a remarkable difference. You have kept the administrative bureaucracy small, put your dollars into the classroom; and public education--at least here in Chicago--is beginning to see the wisdom of such ways.

The title of this conference is "Catholic schools: a gift to the Church." But let me also suggest that you have been a gift to the nation in the way you have provided a model for the way good schools work. And frequently you have set forth this model in urban areas where it has been most desperately needed.

In the inner cities, you have provided an alternative, schools with tuition much lower than the typical private school's, education that provides many students an oasis of order and excellence. There are dozens of impressive statistics about Catholic education, but surely among the most dramatic is the rapid increase in minority enrollments--up 25% since 1970. And particularly in the cities, many of your students are not Catholic. 34 percent of the students in the Archdiocese of Chicago are Baptist, I read recently. In New York, at St. Augustine's School of the Arts in the South Bronx, almost 80

percent of the students are non-Catholic. There are waiting lines for some of your inner-city schools, and the parents who want their children in those schools are Muslim and Hindu, Presbyterian and Baptist. They are well aware that you provide Catholic education. As they see it, your emphasis on what is moral and spiritual--your emphasis on values--is among the most important reasons for having their children in your schools.

But there are not waiting lines everywhere. Enrollments have declined in many inner city Catholic schools. Anyone living in Baltimore or Buffalo or Cleveland knows the result. We read in our papers about schools like Notre Dame Academy in Washington, D. C. closing and it is impossible to read such stories without feeling a wrench. Students at Notre Dame cry as they talk about their school closing, and we weep with them. Here is a school providing disadvantaged youngsters with exactly the education and values they need to overcome their circumstances, exactly the training they need to become leaders and role models for others, exactly what we want all schools to provide--but because enrollment is declining, the school is being closed.

I know that you are troubled by this, and that you are seeking solutions. Some believe that the answer is to have private schools, including parochial ones, included in "choice." As you know, "choice" among public schools is fast

becoming a reality. States and localities across the country are giving parents "choice," partly because the argument for it is powerful: Schools, just like businesses, do better when they have competitive reasons to do better. Some people believe that the more competitive the better, and they argue for a voucher system that would allow all private schools to enter the education marketplace. But there are also private educators, Catholic and non-Catholic, who oppose the idea of government aid, believing that when it comes, regulation cannot be far behind. And there are others in the debate--powerful groups--who contend that if states and localities broaden "choice" to include private schools, public school systems will be harmed.

The debate is an intense one, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. The clash of ideas can generate light as well as heat and can produce creative thinking. In those inner city areas where public schooling has virtually collapsed, some are asking, what do we have to lose by experimenting with a system of "choice" that would include all private schools? Those asking this question point to survey research data showing that those who are poor--those who would be most affected by such a decision--are overwhelmingly in favor of it. At a recent White House conference on the subject of choice, Governor Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin described his 1988 proposal that would have allowed low-income parents in Milwaukee to send their

children to any public or private school in the county. Governor Thompson--an energetic advocate of school reform--was also candid about the fact that his bill didn't go anywhere, that the day was won by groups who saw the plan as a threat to public schools rather than an incentive for improvement.

While this debate goes on, one view seems irrefutable: People need to become more aware of what outstanding Catholic schools accomplish in our inner cities. We need to hear more about the superior test scores in these schools, about the colleges their graduates attend. Increased awareness of these achievements will help bring up enrollments in those inner-city Catholic schools where there are not enough students now. It will help strengthen those schools, help alleviate pressure for closing or consolidation. It will be of aid in raising private funds to support these schools. And it will also strengthen the case of those of you who want to argue in your states and localities for the inclusion of all schools in "choice."

Let me assure you that I will do what I can to help raise awareness of the accomplishments of outstanding Catholic schools. And let me say, too, that the National Endowment for the Humanities is ready to help private schools of all kinds, as well as our nation's public schools, raise their level of excellence. More of your teachers should be applying, for example, to our Teacher/Scholar program, which provides

opportunities for outstanding teachers to become even more knowledgeable about what they teach. This program, jointly funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Reader's Digest, does exactly what President Bush has emphasized again and again is so important: It recognizes and rewards good teaching. You have many fine teachers in your schools. Encourage them to apply to become teacher/scholars, encourage them to apply to the Endowment's institutes and summer seminars, encourage them to take advantage of the wide range of opportunities the NEH offers.

You are an important part of the diverse undertaking by which we educate children in America. Be assured that it is not just with Catholic audiences that I sing your praises. And know as well that we encourage your applications to the Endowment, that just as we support the efforts of a wide range of colleges and universities, so, too, do we support the efforts of all kinds of schools.

It is our mission to foster excellence--and you have, time and again, demonstrated that Catholic education possesses much that is excellent to foster.

You have been, as I noted before, not only a gift to the Church, but to the nation. I thank you for inviting me here today.